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ABSTRACT

One college teacher's experience with teaching Chinese literature in Chinese is described, focusing on the value of teaching literature in its original language and on the interdependence of language and literature. The course was offered to students with 3 or 4 years of college-level Chinese language instruction. Several considerations in developing such a course are noted: students with better language background appreciate the literature better, and students with lower-level language skills improve them through the study of literature; a literature course differs from a language course in it focus, and offers a different kind of language usage to students; selection of instructional materials is crucial; and at the college level, offering breadth of course coverage is more successful than depth. The instructional materials used in the course are outlined, reasons for their selection are discussed, and the approach taken to both linguistic and literary issues is examined. Finally, considerations in student assessment are examined. (MSE)

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The Interdependency of Language and Literature: An Approach to Teaching Chinese Literature in Chinese

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The teaching of foreign literatures has largely been a neglected topic, whether they are taught in translation or in their original languages. For example, discussion of Chinese literature *per se* is generally handled in AAS (Association for Asian Studies) conference, whereas discussions on Chinese language are presented in CLTA (Chinese Language Teachers' Association) annual meeting. Although there does occur one or two lonely panels on the teaching of Chinese literature in CLTA annual conference once in a long while, the topic has on the whole seldom been seriously paid attention to so far.

Is this because the subject is of minor importance? or does the topic offer little for academic as well as pedagogical discussion? Apparently this is not the case, for we all know that success in research does not necessarily yield success in teaching the subject, and the way or methodology employed in the teaching of literature plays an important role in keeping students' interest in and in enhancing their understanding of the subject. There is certainly a lot to be discussed and to be learned. In the following, I would like to share with you my experience in teaching Chinese literature in its original language--Chinese.

Since the course I taught was one in Chinese literature in the original language, which was offered to students who had at least three or four years of Chinese at the college level, I' would like to adumbrate some premises at the outset.

First, literature and language are interdependent with each other. A good mastery of the language will enable students to see the nuances in a literary piece so as to understand it better. In my experience, a student with a better language ability also tends to form a better judgment on interpretations of a literary piece. This may not be so in a course where literature is taught in translation; but as long as the original language is employed in students' analysis of literature, I found it often the case that students better equipped with language tend to appreciate literature

better. On the other hand, studies of literature in the original language can also improve one's language ability, since literary language is generally more advanced use of language and a literary piece is the best source whereby one can learn the language. Not only is literary language generally more vivid and hence more interesting than ordinary texts from a language book, but with its occasional use of dialect, it can also make the language appear authentic and more dynamic. Therefore, it is the ultimate aim for any learner of a language.

Secondly, although literature and language are interdependent with each other, a literature course differs from a language course in its focus. So far as a literature course in the original language is concerned, it teaches literature with the help of the language. Students' understanding of literature is still the focus of the course. Between the two components of the course, therefore, an instructor has to lay emphasis on one. In my opinion, certain important language patterns or usage should certainly be introduced and explained to the students and to make sure that they understand the usage adequately. However, it might go over the boundary to ask students to learn to use them, since to be able to use a certain language pattern goes much beyond a mere understanding of it, hence it takes much more time.

Thirdly, because the literature course involves the use of language, selection of appropriate materials to suit the need as well as the ability of the students is therefore of crucial importance. If the materials contain too many difficult language structures, allusions, or dialectal use, they will overwhelm the students, greatly dampening their interest in Chinese literature read in the original; on the other hand, if the texts are too easy, they may become dull and fail to stimulate students' enthusiasm to tackle Chinese literature themselves as well. The ideal text is a series of materials that can engage students' interest and suit their level of language studies but increase in levels of difficulty.

And lastly, a more specific and also more theoretical issue. So far as the literature course taught in the original language is concerned, shall we teach a literary text in depth so as to lead the students to the forefront of current research and criticism, or shall we go about its width, *i.e.*, to give an introductory survey of criticisms and opinions on the piece. Depending on the length of the class hours, there could certainly be some blending of the two approaches, but generally as an instructor, one has to focus mainly on either one or the other. In my practice, which will be dealt with in more details below, I have found the approach in breadth more successful to college level students. For one thing, most of the students at the college level have not had systematic training in literary studies which involve literary theory and intricate analysis based on close reading. Many students are of non-English majors whose purpose in taking the course may be just of personal interest or to fulfill some major or minor requirements. And for another, in taking this course, students still have to surmount certain language barriers. Viewed this way, an approach based on the breadth of the topic would be more effective in teaching.

In the following, I want to discuss my own practice as an illustration of my approach in this regard and to raise some heuristic issues or questions towards the end of the paper for further consideration. Let me introduce my practice in terms of selection of texts, classroom teaching and assessment of students' progress.

First, selection of texts. The course I taught is titled "Selected Readings in Modern Chinese Literature," an upper-level division course which serves as an introduction of modern Chinese literature to students who have already had extensive exposure to the Chinese language. Most of the students have either studied in China or Taiwan or been raised in those areas when young. In view of their different cultural background, I tried to select materials from both China and Taiwan. And in order to let them have a taste of modern Chinese literature, I endeavored to

make as wide a selection as possible--from short essays, short stories to poems and selection of drama. Although in general they are taught chronologically to give students a sense of literary development, I tried to arrange them so that the easier pieces come first and the difficult ones come last. For example, Xu Dishan's essay *Luo hua sheng* (Peanut), Zhu Ziqing's *Bei ying* (Back Features) and Xu Zhimo's poem *Zai bie kang qiao* (Farewell Again to Cambridge) go before Shen Congwen's short story *Xiao xiao* or Bai Xianyong's *Jin Daban de zui hou yi ye* (The Last Night of Jin Daban). This is not only because the last two pieces narrate some peculiar cultural customs and habits that require extensive explanation, but also because they contain quite a lot of local dialect which may prove difficult for the students. Since my class meets twice a week with 75 minutes each session, I tried to avoid overly long text that will make both teaching and learning a tiring process. In general, I tried to choose a text that can be handled in no more than two weeks. In cases of certain long and yet excellent and representative literary pieces, I tried to make excerpts. Cao Yu's play *Lei Yu* (Thunderstorm) is a representative modern play and had an enormous influence on modern Chinese literature. I therefore used only the last act of it in my selection. To enhance students' interest, I make a point of choosing those text that are interesting and significant which can stimulate students' discussion or debate.

Selection of texts is only the first step. The key process is still in the classroom. How shall we handle the materials so that they are easily understood to the students? For each text, I compiled a vocabulary list with English translations for students' preview. Certain important linguistic patterns or set expressions are to be explained in the context in class. Generally I do not ask my students to be able to use them in their own writing with the reason given above, but I always make sure that they understand them thoroughly by giving them several examples using the same patterns or the expressions. Linguistic explanation goes hand in hand with the

explication of the literary text. On the other hand, I make a distinction between two kinds of linguistic items: one is the important item that may affect the understanding and the other is not as important and generally not impeding one's understanding. For the former, I will usually pick it up for an explanation while for the latter I encourage students to make a guess. If they can understand the general gist of the passage, I will let it pass without bothering for an explication. This is natural because even if native speakers will often make an educated guess at certain words or expressions that they come across in their reading.

As for explication of literary issues in a text, I prefer discussion with students. With background knowledge supplied and language structure explained, I always put forward a number of questions to lead their discussion. In order to induce their opinions and to incite their debate, I sometimes played devil's advocate. For example, in discussing Hu Shi's poem *Wo de erzi* (My Son), I found it hard for the students now to understand Hu Shi's proposition about the relationship between parents and children at the time of the May 4 Movement. A little historical background with special regard to family relationship was called for first. Then, I pretended to be a father and addressed the students as children and initiated the proposal that since I gave birth to them, they would have to repay the "debt" with interest to me by being filial and pious and by enslaving themselves for me during my old age. Students were all infuriated by my proposal and called me too greedy as a father. I held on to my position and debated with them by citing the exchange values of birth and labor to defend my fair trade on human relations. Students got more excited and one after another they bombarded me with their illustrations of either human equality, parental responsibility or social obligations. Some even resorted to certain concepts of Christianity to show the creation of human beings by God. All their arguments, although not all acceptable to me, contributed to their understanding of what Hu Shi says about parent as a debtor

practicing "usury." In the end, everyone was happy about the debate. The success of the debate lay of course in my preparation. I had to prepare for various possible answers or arguments so as to channel the debate along the line I wanted to go, and not to make the debate turn into an open-ended discussion.

As I said earlier, in general, I try to provide students with various views on a certain issue in a literary text as a sort of introduction in stead of making in-depth analysis of a text as a major approach for the class. For example, in discussing Lu Xun's short story *Kuangren riji* (A Madman's Diary), I chose to present to students various views on the story such as social criticism, narrative features and allegorical reading rather than introduce to them some intricate deconstructive or Foucoultian approach. The latter approach is important and interesting, but I tend to think that for those students who have just entered the realm of literary analysis and have not yet been quite familiar with those complex literary theories and advanced training in literary analysis, it will do them disservice when they not only have an unfamiliar text, but also have an unfamiliar analytical tool at hand, which will make them ill at ease for an appropriate task. Those advanced and in-depth analysis are more fit for senior level seminars or for graduate studies. In the class that I taught, I regarded the introductory approach more appropriate, more welcome to the students and hence more successful in teaching.

Lastly, let me pick up the topic of assessment for student progress. My purpose in the assessment is two-fold: to make sure that students have an appropriate understanding of the texts and to let them enjoy what they are learning rather than a burden for complaint. For the first purpose, I have designed a number of quizzes and papers to be done in Chinese only. While the quizzes are designed to check their understanding and knowledge of the texts they have studied, the papers gave them opportunities to further elaborate their views on various issues discussed in

class. As for the second purpose of assessing students' progress while maintaining their interest in and their enjoyment of what they are learning, I made use of several class hours for their oral activities. After studying Cao Yu's drama "Thunderstorm" (the last Act), for example, I asked students themselves to perform it as part of their oral grade. Having studied Shen Congwen's short story *Xiaoxiao* and seen the movie based on the story, I arranged to have students debate on the issues of women's virgin and social punishment. Students were eager to express their views so that without my involvement they were soon engaged in heated debate among themselves. As an observer, I assessed their oral performance through these activities and students themselves told me that they enjoyed such performances a great deal because they were a good combination of literature and language and they felt that they had participated in both. For myself, I also achieved my goal, which was to assess students' progress.

There are a few related issues that I have either experienced or have thought about in my teaching career, which I would like to present here for discussion or for further consideration. First, a sort of theoretical issue: do we regard a course in, say, Chinese literature in Chinese primarily as a language or a literature course, or both? This is important because it will result in different pedagogical strategies. In my college, it seems the course is put in the category of the fourth-year Chinese language course. In my approach which I mentioned earlier, I tend to view it as both a language and literature course. This may then involve some practical concern: if the course counts as both, does a student fulfill both language and literature requirements by taking the course? If not, what is the purpose of offering the course other than introducing students to some literary texts? On the other hand, if language learning is our ultimate goal, one may as well introduce some other types of texts, which can achieve the same, if not better, goal.

The second issues involves teaching methodology and is related to the above concern. If one wants to impart both language and literature, shall we treat our texts as ones for an intensive study or just for some extensive reading. For intensive study, one should treat the text more closely in terms of various grammar points, special language patterns, word usage as well as of course literary themes, etc. As an extensive reading, however, one should then train students so that they can understand texts and read it fast since only comprehension is the aim. As is apparent, either approach has its merit, but ultimately, the adoption of either will in various ways be connected with one's overall planning of the course as well as with one's purpose in offering the course.